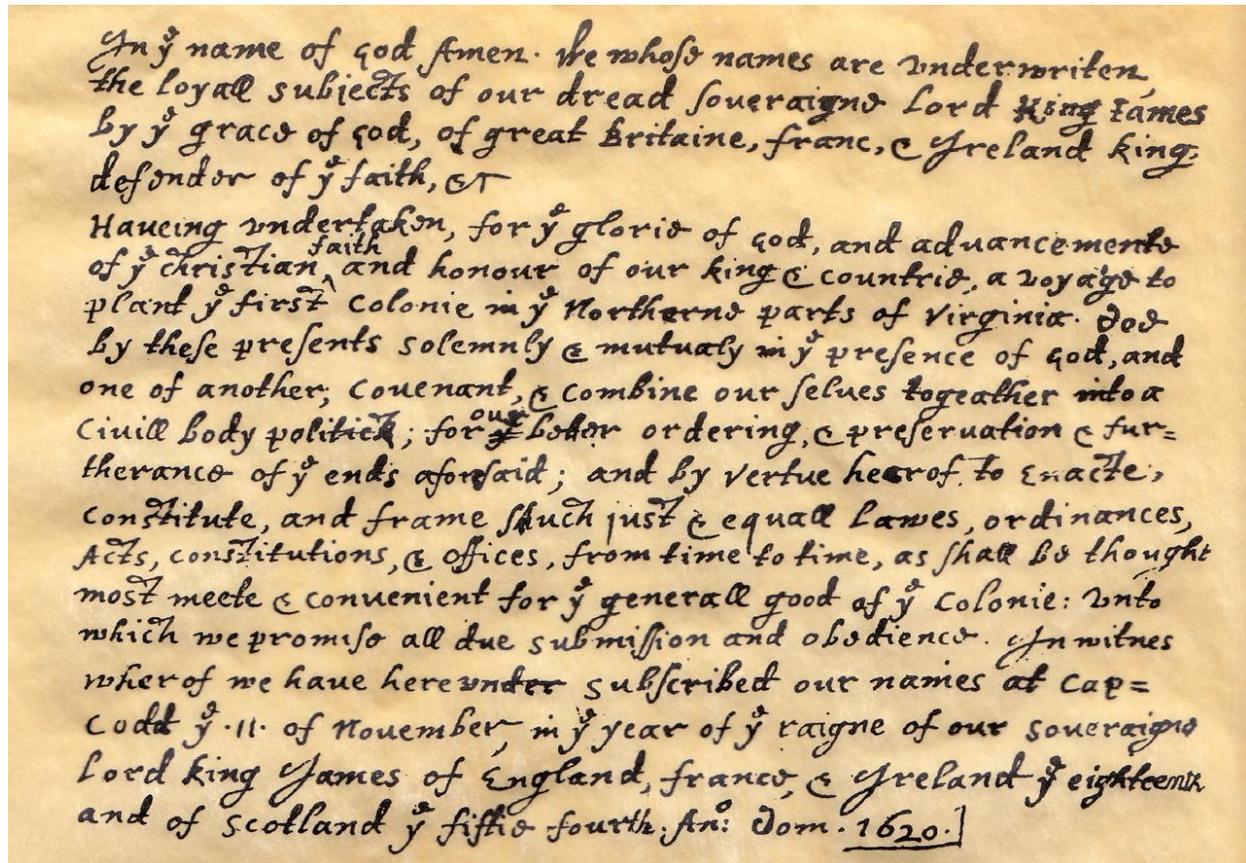


The Mayflower Compact

The Mayflower is "indissolubly linked with the fundamentals of American democratic institutions. She was the wave-rocked cradle of our liberties." (Henry B. Culver, Naval Historian, 1924)



"In the name of God, Amen. We, whose names are underwritten, the Loyal Subjects of our dread Sovereign Lord, King James, by the Grace of God, of England, France and Ireland, King, Defender of the Faith, e&.

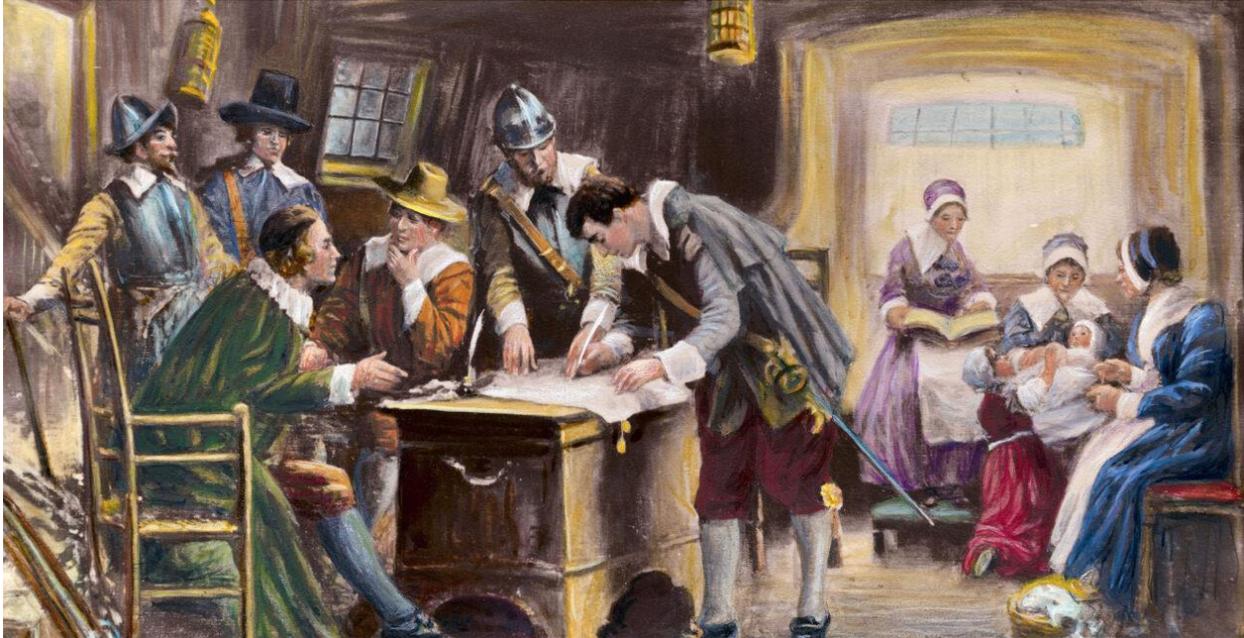
"Having undertaken for the Glory of God, and Advancement of the Christian Faith, and the Honour of our King and Country, a voyage to plant the first colony in the northern parts of Virginia;

"do by these presents, solemnly and mutually in the Presence of God and one of another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil Body Politick, for our better Ordering and Preservation, and Furtherance of the Ends aforesaid;

"And by Virtue hereof to enact, constitute, and frame, such just and equal Laws, Ordinances, Acts, Constitutions and Offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the General good of the Colony; unto which we promise all due submission and obedience.

"In Witness whereof we have hereunto subscribed our names at Cape Cod the eleventh of November, in the Reign of our Sovereign Lord, King James of England, France and Ireland, the eighteenth, and of Scotland the fifty-fourth. Anno Domini, 1620."

“The Mayflower Compact was actually not so named until 1793, and was known by the citizens of Plymouth as the ‘Plymouth combination,’ or the ‘agreement between the settlers at New Plymouth.’”
(Ernst)



Representation of the Signing of the Mayflower Compact by Myles Standish, William Bradford, William Brewster and John Carver (Edward Percy Moran)

The following looks at phrases within the agreement and their context:

1. In the name of God, Amen.

The Mayflower Compact opens with words that might be used to begin and end a prayer. The colony's leaders are acknowledging God as their guiding moral compass, above their loyalty to England, King James, and their everyday concerns for survival. This is no coincidence, since the leaders of Plymouth Colony had first formed a spiritual community during their time in the Netherlands. In a sense the colony - as described in the compact - was the political extension of that earlier religious congregation.

2. We, whose names are underwritten.

The 41 men who signed the Mayflower Compact included servants, soldiers, farmers, and tradesmen; only one signatory, William Brewster, had a limited university education. The high proportion of working-class settlers at Plymouth likely helped them to endure the harrowing first years. Other 17th-century English settler groups - the one at Jamestown, for instance - included many men who had little experience or skill in manual labor. They were often unprepared for the huge amount of physical work necessary to build houses, erect a fort, and clear farmland.

3. The loyal subjects of our dread sovereign lord King James.

The Pilgrims had broken off from the established Church of England, but they did not view themselves as rebels against the Crown. Thus, from the very beginning, the compact emphasizes the colonists' intention to remain loyal to King James I. Their experiment in self-government is not, the compact suggests, the same thing as founding a new country. Rather, the settlers are founding a new “body politic” that is still under the rule of James.

4. For the glory of God, and advancement of the Christian faith.

Many - but not all - of the Plymouth settlers were motivated by a desire for religious freedom. Rejecting the hierarchy and rituals of the Church of England, these colonists came to be known as Separatists or Pilgrims. This emphasis on religious expression would be a common theme in the founding of many North American colonies: Puritans settled in Massachusetts Bay, Quakers in Pennsylvania, and so forth.

5. A voyage to plant the first colony in the northern parts of Virginia.

To a modern reader, it may seem odd that the colonists describe their settlement as being in Virginia. The colony of Virginia, however, once encompassed a territory much larger than the modern state. At the time of the Mayflower landing, Virginia was simply the territory administered by the Virginia Company, a royally chartered group tasked with establishing North American settlements. With the Charter of 1609 the company's jurisdiction extended to the mouth of the Hudson - just south of the Mayflower's intended landing point.

6. Covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil body politic.

A civil body politic is just an organized group of citizens with its own laws and government. In describing the formation of this group as a covenant, the drafters of the compact evoke the biblical covenant made between God and the Israelites in the Old Testament. The dual nature of their agreement - religious covenant and political combination - reflects the dual nature of Plymouth Colony itself.

7. For our better ordering and preservation.

Preservation is a key word here. The Plymouth colonists were well aware that if they did not band together, they would likely die. Even with an orderly governing structure in place, survival was far from guaranteed. More than half of the Plymouth settlers died before the end of the first winter in the New World, including a large majority of the women.

8. And furtherance of the ends aforesaid.

The "ends aforesaid" are the already-stated goals of the Mayflower voyage: glorify God, promote Christianity, and bring honor to England. Nothing in the latter half of the compact addresses these ends specifically - instead, the focus is on creating a framework for later, more specific laws. Many of those laws, however, would be aimed at preserving the moral and social order that the Pilgrims saw as central to Christian living. The religious character of the laws can be seen in Plymouth's 1636 legal code, which - among other things - proclaimed the death penalty for witchcraft.

9. By virtue hereof [we] do enact, constitute, and frame.

By virtue hereof means, roughly, "as a result of writing and signing this document." Rather than attempting to derive their authority from any previous law, the Mayflower colonists established the compact as its own miniconstitution, so to speak. By signing it they essentially agree to follow whatever laws are collectively deemed necessary to keep the colony running, laws they will establish as necessary.

10. Such just and equal laws, ordinances, acts, constitutions, and officers.

The laws established in the wake of the Mayflower Compact were designed to protect the colonists' religious expression and to promote self-rule. Nonetheless, Plymouth Colony was not a haven of absolute religious freedom. Those who refused to conform to Separatist religious practices - most notably the Quakers in later years—were denied a say in the public life of the colony. The “just and equal” character of Plymouth Colony law extended only to the Separatist majority.

11. From time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the colony.

Built into the Mayflower Compact is the idea of a much more detailed legal code to come afterward. The actual laws of the colony, the compact recognizes, will need to be spelled out in greater detail later. They will also need to be updated “from time to time” to deal with new circumstances, such as the growth of the colony and the arrival of new settlers. These laws were first collected in written form in 1636, with updates published throughout the colony's lifespan.

12. Unto which we promise all due submission and obedience.

The stipulation of “submission and obedience” reflects the tensions between the Separatist Pilgrims and the non-Separatist Strangers. Though they numbered slightly less than half of the Mayflower colonists, the Pilgrims were a more unified and organized force than the Strangers. In effect, the Strangers were made to submit to and obey the laws sanctioned by the Pilgrims.

13. In witness whereof we have hereunto subscribed our names at Cape-Cod the eleventh of November ... 1620.

The Mayflower Compact was signed before its crew and passengers had even disembarked from their voyage across the Atlantic.

It may seem an odd choice to stop and draft a document when supplies were running short and those on board had been cooped up for months. However, when the colonists arrived in Massachusetts instead of Virginia, they were outside the reach of any existing colonial law.

They felt an agreement of some kind - even a symbolic one - was necessary to keep the diverse and discontented settlers from fighting among themselves. This shows they were far from revolutionaries but more likely concerned with self-preservation and common sense.

14. In the reign of our sovereign lord King James, of England, France, and Ireland ... and of Scotland.

Toward the end of the compact, the signers reiterate their loyalty to King James. They acknowledge him as king of England and Ireland (which he had ruled since 1603) as well as Scotland (where he had reigned since 1567).

In addition, the compact names James as king of France, a title British monarchs had formally claimed since the 15th century. James, who wished for peace throughout Europe, never attempted to assert this title by force.

15. Mr. John Carver, Mr. William Bradford, ... Edward Liester.

The names appearing at the head of this list are the de facto leaders of the colony, three of whom - Carver, Bradford, and Winslow - went on to serve terms as governor. No women signed the document, since the English customs of the time gave women no official say in political affairs. When the colony's laws were written down, only men (and even then, not all men) would be allowed to vote and hold office. (CourseHero-com)

The Mayflower Compact was regarded as law until 1686. Colonies, states, and in time the nation as a whole continued to rely on written documents both to create their own identities and to limit government powers.

The Mayflower compact is a significant historical document, signed by the Pilgrims and the so-called Strangers, the craftsmen, merchants and indentured servants brought with them to establish a successful colony.

The following are the men that signed the Mayflower Compact:

John Carver	Christopher Martin	Thomas Rogers	Thomas Williams
John Howland	William Mullins	Thomas Tinker	Degory Priest
William Brewster	William White	John Rigsdale	Edmund Margesson
Edward Winslow	Stephen Hopkins	James Chilton	Peter Brown
George Soule	Edward Leister	Edward Fuller	Richard Britteridge
William Bradford	Richard Warren	John Turner	Richard Clark
Isaac Allerton	John Billington	Francis Eaton	Richard Gardiner
Samuel Fuller	Edward Tilly	Edward Doty	Gilbert Winslow
John Crackstone	John Tilly	Moses Fletcher	John Alden
Myles Standish	Francis Cooke	John Goodman	John Allerton
			Thomas English

It agreed to pass "just and equal laws for the good of the Colony". The first experiment in New World self-government, some scholars even see it as a kind of American Magna Carta, a template for the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution. (Bryant, BBC)

The legacy of the pilgrims is foundational. The work ethic. The fact Americans don't take much annual holiday. Notions of self-reliance and attitudes towards government welfare. Laws that prohibit young adults from drinking in bars until the age of 21. A certain prudishness. The religiosity.

Americans continue to expect their presidents to be men of faith. In fact, no occupant of the White House has openly identified as an atheist.

Also the profit motive was strong among the settlers, and with it the belief that prosperity was a divine reward for following God's path - a forerunner of the gospel of prosperity preached by modern-day television evangelists. (Bryant, BBC)

Julia Ernst, Associate Dean for Academic and Student Affairs and Associate Professor at the University of North Dakota School of Law, published a paper 'Mayflower Compact - Celebrating Four Years of Influence on US Democracy' for the North Dakota Law Review, Vol 95:1. In part, it states,

The crux of the Mayflower Compact was to establish a common agreement among all the people in the colony, "mutually" and "in the presence of one another," to "Covenant and Combine ourselves together into a Civil Body Politic." This is the beginning of a democratic form of governance established by the people and for the people under the principle of majority rule.

It is a foundational document - not a set of specific rules, but a charter creating the polity (the public relationships among the members of that community) and the government to institute and maintain order in that society.

They agreed to "Covenant" with each other - to enter into a formal and fundamentally sacred reciprocal promise with every other member of the community.

This form of agreement reflected the earnest solemnity of the covenant theological system and the covenant political system with which most of them were probably accustomed. The Separatists utilized covenants in their religious beliefs and practices, as mentioned previously.

And likely many of the Strangers were familiar with covenants through the evolving intellectual debates spreading through Europe during that timeframe, due to the Reformation and related evolution in thought about religion, government, and society.

Not only did they make a formal promise to each other through the "Covenant," but they also pledged themselves to "Combine" with each other - to work together as one unit for the common good of all members of the diverse community, both Saints and Strangers.

In fact, the Mayflower Compact was not so designated until 1793 - it was originally called the Plymouth Combination, reflecting the coming together of all individual members into one cohesive, collective, egalitarian unit.

The Mayflower Compact does not contain all the elements of a written constitution, such as fleshing out the form in which the new government will take shape. However, it forms the basis for such a government through their agreement "to enact, constitute and frame such just and equal Laws Ordinances, Acts, Constitutions and Offices, from time to time."

Thus, the Mayflower Compact was in effect a pre-constitutional agreement, as it expressly envisions that the members of the civil society will jointly create "Constitutions and Offices."

In other words, their community will together decide upon and implement the form of government that will govern their society through the "Laws, Ordinances, [and] Acts" legislated by that government.

The phrase "from time to time" modifies not only the "Laws, Ordinances, [and] Acts" - meaning the people can change them as justified by changing circumstances over time - but also modifies the "Constitutions and Offices" ordering the government - meaning the people can change the very structure of government as similarly justified by changing circumstances over time.

This engrained flexibility is prescient of what some scholars have called the living Constitution, noting that the framers of our nation intentionally crafted the U.S. Constitution in a skeletal and adaptable manner, so it would naturally modernize to reflect the advancements of the United States as its society continues to embrace broader conceptions of civil rights, as exemplified by successes in achieving greater equality for women, people of color, members practicing diverse religious faiths, and so on.

Of course, Great Britain did not have (nor does it yet have) a written constitution, so the drafters of the Mayflower Compact would not necessarily have conceived of a singular written document ordering the governmental structure - hence their reference to “Constitutions” as a plural term.

However, the Pilgrims did believe in the preeminence of the Bible as the written document providing the structure for their Christian faith and practices, so calling for adherence to a written document to provide structure for their civil ordering and practices would have been a natural concept for them to adopt.

Significantly, all of the “Laws, Ordinances, Acts, Constitutions and Offices” must be “just and equal” in order to be valid under the Mayflower Compact.

They were also intended “for our better ordering and preservation” of each of the signers, who represented all of the diverse members of the community. In addition, only those edicts that “shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the Colony” were to be adopted.

Each of these phrases point to a relatively democratically minded group of people who agreed that the government must promote justice and adhere to principles of equality.

They adopted a republican (i.e., representative) approach, in the sense that the adult men who signed the document did so not only on behalf of themselves, and on behalf the women, children, non-freemen, and sick aboard the Mayflower, but also on behalf of all members of Plymouth Colony who joined the settlement after the Mayflower Compact had been originally signed.

Indeed, the leaders of the community continued to refer to their authority under the Mayflower Compact for years to come, even after the original signers were far outnumbered by the “newcomers” to the settlement, as well as the progeny born to the original settlers in the New World.

It is unclear whether the signers conscientiously thought of themselves as representatives of the interests of those who did not sign the document - but it was clear that they thought of themselves as representatives of the others with respect to their obligations under the compact and their duties to support the document and ensuing government for the good of the colony as a whole.

If the purpose of government is to protect rights, such as justice and equality, and all people within that community are endowed with those inalienable rights that the government must protect, then the Mayflower Compact was a significant step in recognizing and protecting those nascent human rights.

Human rights have often been taken away by unjust rulers through conquest, marginalization, brutalization, tyranny, and so on, and therefore those governments are illegitimate because they are not protecting rights, but instead are violating rights.

In contrast, the Mayflower Compact supports this concept of rights, among those including justice and equality, which the government must protect in order to remain a legitimate government.

Despite its short length, and the fact that its colony no longer exists as a distinct political entity (unlike Massachusetts, Virginia, and the other initial colonies that later became states), the Mayflower Compact has risen to become a preeminent, pre-constitutional political document of the colonial era in the United States.

In fact, the very problems that troubled the Mayflower voyagers - the fact that they landed in an area outside of their official patent, and the fact that a few unruly passengers threatened the survival of the colony due to their lack of authority under a valid patent - were the root of the Mayflower Compact that blossomed into the political establishment of a written and binding constitution-like agreement, democratic participation, just and equal laws, and the consent of the governed.

We continue to laud the Mayflower Compact and the Pilgrims to this day for laying the foundation of these American democratic values.

Although its introduction into the colonies was based on the happenstance of a few insubordinate rabble rousers aboard the Mayflower, it subsequently contributed to American mythology as a conceptual precursor to the Declaration of Independence and a federal theory of government based on popularly founded state constitutions, along with the U.S. Constitution, that are now known worldwide as beacons of human rights, equality, social justice, and civil liberties.

To preserve this rich heritage, we must continue to ensure that people throughout our country are aware of our history, including the contributions made by the Mayflower Compact.

Today, a visitor to the lobby of the American Bar Association headquarters in Chicago is greeted by glass etchings portraying inspiring legal documents: the Magna Carta, U.S. Constitution and Declaration of Independence and the Mayflower Compact.

One of the world's largest professional organizations recognizes the historical importance of the November 11, 1620, signing. The associate director of the ABA Division for Public Education wrote that "the complex roots of the U.S. Constitution can be traced to these colonial documents," including the Mayflower Compact.

"The Mayflower Compact reaffirmed one of the fundamental ideas of the Magna Carta; namely, that no political society could flourish without respect for the rule of law," said Kim Holmes, executive vice president of The Heritage Foundation.

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the Mayflower, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young